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# Maine's Journey into the Arctic: Why the Arctic Council Matters to Maine

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## COMMENTARY

## Maine's Journey into the Arctic: Why the Arctic Council Matters to Maine

by Dave Canarie<sup>1</sup>

The Arctic Council, whose officials met in Portland in early October of 2016, is relatively young as far as international organizations go. Now in its twentieth year, it faces inevitable growing pains, but it has nevertheless evolved into the preeminent forum for Arctic issues.

At least one reason for its success is a spirit of cooperation among its members, which is influenced by the consensus-based decision-making approach of indigenous Arctic peoples. One diplomat said Arctic officials work together so well because of their shared recognition that “We are, in fact, all in the same small kayak and we must work together to meet the storms ahead.”

High-level Arctic officials from the United States and seven other nations in the Arctic region, and representatives of indigenous people from the Arctic, gathered in Portland October 4–6, 2016, to discuss issues of importance to the region. But, just what is the Arctic Council? Who are these high-level officials and indigenous people? And why does any of this matter to Maine or to other parts of the world?

In *The Arctic Council: Governance within the Far North*, Douglas C. Nord of Umeå University in Sweden provides a concise, thoroughly researched, and immensely informative overview of the Arctic Council.

With a coordinating office in Tromsø, Norway, the Arctic Council has three categories of members. First, are eight voting member states that have territory within the Arctic region and who signed the declaration creating

the Arctic Council. These *Arctic Eight* are the United States, Canada, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and the Russian Federation. Each of these states designates senior Arctic officials who manage the ongoing operation of the council, and the council's meetings, such as the recent meeting in Portland.

The second category of members in the Arctic Council is comprised of associations representing six groups of indigenous Arctic people: Aleut, Athabaskan, Gwich'in, Inuit, Russian indigenous peoples, and the Saami. These groups are permanent participants in the council, and they also attended the Arctic Council meeting in Portland. According to Nord, the permanent participants “articulate distinctive indigenous concerns and perspectives that may not be fully represented by the national governments” who are members (Nord 2016: 38). In welcoming participation from indigenous peoples, the Arctic Council has demonstrated inclusiveness that is uncommon among international organizations. Moreover, the council has embraced the consensus model used by indigenous people in the Arctic region, implicitly acknowledging the “wisdom to be gained in following the traditional decision-making practices of the Arctic” (Nord 2016: 71).

The third category of participants is comprised of 32 “observers” including non-Arctic states such as the China, India, the United Kingdom, Spain, as well as a number of nongovernmental organizations ranging from the International Red Cross and the UN

Development Program to the Association of World Reindeer Herders.

Interest in an international forum for Arctic issues can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, but progress toward any type of governance was disrupted by World War II and the Cold War. In fact, during the early 1980s the United States and the Soviet Union “engaged in renewed military buildups” in the Arctic region (Nord 2016: 13).

Nord points to two events in the late 1980s that accelerated efforts toward Arctic governance. First, dangerous leaks from the Soviet nuclear power plant in Chernobyl spread radioactive material throughout the polar region. This raised “a general alarm among all circumpolar states concerning...transboundary pollution and environmental contamination throughout the Arctic” (2016: 13). Second, in October 1987, new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev gave an influential speech in Murmansk where he proposed countering the buildup of military forces in the Arctic by asking that all states with land in the Arctic region put aside their differences and turn the Arctic into a “general zone of peace and fruitful cooperation” (Nord 2016: 14).

Those two events reignited interest in governance for the Arctic region. Under Canada's leadership, these efforts culminated in the 1996 Ottawa Declaration in which the eight Arctic states agreed to establish a high-level forum to cooperate on Arctic issues, oversee sustainable development and environmental programs, and disseminate information about Arctic-related issues.

The Arctic Council has a leadership chair that rotates every two years among the eight Arctic states. The United States' two-year term as chair began on April 24, 2015. As chair, the United States has

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identified three areas of focus for its term: improving economic and living conditions in Arctic communities; Arctic Ocean safety, security, and stewardship; and climate change. These are chief among the issues discussed at the meeting in Portland.

The Arctic Council matters to Maine because Maine is inextricably linked to the Arctic by its proximity to the region. Maine is the closest state on the East Coast of the United States to the Arctic region. This proximity has in turn facilitated a growing number of connections. As Maine's engagement with the Arctic region increases, there will likely be an expansion of student exchanges with colleges and universities throughout the region. A press release by the University of Southern Maine (August 2, 2016) describes one such connection: a new student exchange program with Reykjavik University in Iceland. According to an article in the *Portland Press Herald* (October 26, 2016), the University of New England has announced a partnership with two universities in Iceland: the University of Akureyri and Holar University College. Several Maine scientific institutions are already conducting research in the Arctic, and this work is expected to expand over time. Growing connections between Maine and the Arctic are also illustrated by Eimskip's—an Icelandic shipping company—2013 decision to replace Norfolk, Virginia, with Portland, as a port of call, recognizing the shorter transit time to Reykjavik from Portland. This development connects Portland with shipping routes through Iceland to numerous ports in Europe. Portland's role in Arctic-related shipping will only increase as the catastrophic melting of Arctic sea ice opens up new global trade routes.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to increased trade with the Arctic region, Eimskip's presence in

Portland has heightened Mainers' awareness of the region. According to Mia Bennett (2016), "Maine is now looking northeast to a market in Europe that it hadn't really noticed before....Maine is also trying to expand upon business opportunities in the Nordic countries."

The Arctic Council is important beyond the Arctic region because of its successful model of regional governance and problem solving. As the United Nations continues to grow in size, it develops the attributes of a large bureaucracy. In an article in *The Telegraph* (June 26, 2015) celebrating the institution's seventieth anniversary in 2015, former UN Deputy General Secretary-General Mark Malloch-Brown commented on the heavy bureaucracy of the UN and remarked that it could be "labyrinthian, hard to penetrate and often apparently immune to tragedy." In contrast, the Arctic Council's effective regional cooperation could be a model for regional governance within the United States or internationally. The United Nations, or other national or transnational organizations, may improve their problem-solving capabilities by studying the relatively new and effective Arctic Council model. This could involve, for example, addressing smaller components of larger problems and involving stakeholders who are directly involved in the issues. Nord concludes "the story of Arctic cooperation has done much to inform policymakers from other affected countries regarding how states can continue to work together despite their disagreements and come away with enhanced commitment to partnership" (2016: 88).

The Arctic Council meeting in Portland last month is another step forward in Arctic governance and in Maine's continuing journey into the Arctic. 🐻

## ENDNOTES

- 1 For more by Dave Canarie, follow him on Twitter: @DaveCanarie.
- 2 For more information on Maine's growing connection to the Arctic, I recommend this article by Tom Bell, "How Maine Is Turning Itself into an Arctic Player," Alaska Dispatch News, October 6, 2016, <https://www.adn.com/arctic/2016/10/06/how-maine-is-turning-itself-into-an-arctic-player/>.

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